Gender based violence between reproduction and social change. Research and action in four Italian municipalities

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ABSTRACT: This article intends to discuss the issue of violence against women under two perspectives: by analysing the forms of domination and subjugation that reproduce the violent dynamics of men against women; highlighting the social change, analysed through the narratives of the interviewees involved in a quanti-qualitative research and also through the test of a governance model to contrast gender violence. The research was carried out from 2010 to 2013 in four municipalities of Milan province to investigate the socio-cultural factors of violence against women. It consists in: a survey of 300 interviews with women aged 20-59, three focus groups with 20 women involved in the previous survey, 10 in-depth interviews with sex-offenders prisoners (men) who were attending an Intensified Program of the Offence Elaboration. Research and actions taken on the four Municipalities, provide tools for understanding the social construction of gender violence phenomenon; the next step is to learn how to break the circle of violence. With reference to this last point, I bring the example of a governance model deployed by one of the municipal administration involved in the research project.

1. Introduction. Definitions and concepts of gender based violence

Gender violence and violence against women[1], in its various forms, has consequences and high costs in terms of the victims' physical and mental health. It severely affects both the

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[1] 'Gender violence' and 'violence against women' are terms often used interchangeably because most of the gender-based violence is exercised by men against women and girls. However, it is important to keep the concept of 'gender-based violence', as this highlights the fact that violence against women is an expression of power inequalities that persist between men and women (EIGE website, http://eige.europa.eu/gender-based-violence/what-is-gender-based-violence).

management of daily life and relationships; besides, welfare costs and public health are not so negligible, as several European sources show (EIGE, 2014[2]).

Thus, what do violence against women and/or gender-based violence mean? According to the 3rd article of the Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, also known as the Istanbul Convention[3], "[G]ender-based violence against women shall mean violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately (...)". The same Convention states that violence against women should be understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination to the detriment of women. This includes all actions resulting in physical, sexual, psychological, and economic harms, or suffering caused to women, including the threat itself of those actions, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, both in public and in private contexts (Council of Europe, 2011: art. 3a).

Violence against women encompasses crimes that disproportionately impact on women, such as sexual assault, rape and 'domestic violence'. It is a violation of women's fundamental rights with respect to dignity and equality. The impact of violence against women stretches beyond those women who are themselves victims, since it affects families, friends and society as a whole. It calls for a critical look at how society and the state respond to this abuse. Measures to fight and prevent violence against women are therefore required at both European Union (EU) and national levels.

We can distinguish between direct and indirect forms of gender-based violence: direct violence against women includes physical (including violence in close relationships), sexual (including rape, sexual assault and harassment in all public and private spheres of life), psychological (including threats, humiliation, mocking and controlling behaviours), and economic violence, which means preventing the victim from accessing their financial resources, property, healthcare, education, or the labour market, and denying them participation in economic decision-making (EU Council, 2014).

Trafficking in human beings, slavery, sexual exploitation; harmful practices such as child and forced marriages, female genital mutilation; emerging forms of violations, such as online

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[2] According to the European Institute for Gender Equality's report, gender-based violence costs the EU about 258 billion Euros per year while the actions to prevent it take only 1% of that figure (EIGE, 2014).
[3] The Italian government issues Decree-Law 93 in 2013 directed to implement the Istanbul Convention, which became Law 15 October 2013, n. 119.

harassment, stalking and bullying are also considered forms of direct gender-based violence (EU Council, 2014).

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is one of the most widespread forms of direct violence against women, and includes a range of sexual, psychological and physical coercive acts used against adult and adolescent women by a current or former intimate partner. According to the EU-wide Survey on Violence against Women conducted by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), 22% of women have experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence by a current or previous partner (EU FRA, 2014).

According to the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, institutional or structural violence is "any form of structural inequality or institutional discrimination that maintains a woman in a subordinate position, whether physical or ideological, to other people within her family, household or community" (UN OHCHR, 2011: 8).

We can understand indirect violence as a type of structural violence, characterised by norms, attitudes and stereotypes around gender in general, and violence against women in particular. Indirect violence operates within a larger societal context; institutions, and individuals within and outside these institutions, are all engaged in the production and reproduction of attitudes that normalise violence against women (UN CEDAW, 1992).

Inequalities – and the forms of violence connected to them – are intersectional. They are the result of an interplay between multiple power structures that produce and reproduce hierarchical distinctions, for example regarding race, (dis)abilities, age, social classes, and gender. This means that while all women face discrimination based on gender, some women experience multiple forms of discrimination, of which gender is only one component (Zanfrini, 2016; 2005; Lombardi, 2016a; 2016b; 2016c; 2005).

2. The social and cultural roots

This section is dedicated to a reflection on some key elements of the socio-cultural construction of violence against women. In this space, we will try to discuss some issues that different theories interpret as the soil in which violence against women is produced and reproduced. We are going to talk about gender inequality and socialisation processes, which in turn build and reproduce inequalities and discrimination (Lombardi, 2016c). It is

interesting to start by quoting the preamble of the aforementioned Istanbul Convention, which recognizes gender inequality and its structural connotation:

> Condemning all forms of violence against women and domestic violence;
>
> Recognising that the realisation of de jure and de facto equality between women and men is a key element in the prevention of violence against women;
>
> Recognising that violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men, which have led to domination over, and discrimination against, women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women;
>
> Recognising the structural nature of violence against women as gender-based violence, and that violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men. (Council of Europe, 2011: 1)

This statement may suggest an institutionalization of the recognition of gender inequality and therefore the legitimacy to combat it, thus becoming a key factor for the elimination of violence against women. Several studies show continuity between domination and exploitation and violent actions against women (Romito, 2005; 2000; Reale, 2000; Filosof, 2000; Gillioz *et al.*, 2000). According to Romito (2000), indeed:

> The expectations society and partners have of women and their complete availability (material, sexual and emotional) are the conditions in which mistreatments appear as they are: the means for maintaining supremacy (Romito, 2000: 12)

Rape, in particular, is clearly linked to the relationship that identifies masculinity with power, domination and rudeness as Giddens writes: "mostly it is not the result of uncontrollable sexual desire, but the result of the link between sexuality and the sense of power and superiority". In fact, the author still informs: "the sexual act itself is less important than the degradation imposed on women" (Giddens, 2000: 182).

According to many authors, gender violence is an issue that historically concerns the social construction of identities and gender relationships, and is rooted in patriarchal social relationships based on a system of male dominance and female subordination (Eisenstein, 1979; Romito, 2000; Giddens, 2000; Ruspini, 2003; Andersen & Taylor, 2013; 2004). This means that we can speak of sexism, which is the set of institutionalised practices and beliefs through which women are socially controlled, on the basis of the meaning given to the differences between genders (Andersen & Taylor, 2013). The concept of patriarchy is linked to the concept of sexism. The patriarchal system is spread all over the world and, in those kinds of societies, husbands have authority over wives in the private sphere, but the public and the institutional spheres too are not free from this disparity (Romito, 2000), because the decision-making positions and power are held by men. In short, "gender stratification is an institutional system based on specific belief systems that enshrine the superiority of men over women" (Andersen & Taylor, 2004: 236). The concept of gendered institution can be observed in the fact that every institutional environment is structured by gender. For example, children and young people learn about gender roles at school, which is a gender-oriented institution itself, as it is based on specific models of distinction, both institutional and individual. Gender is a part of the structure of society, as are race and social classes, and as such it is a privilege that builds an inequality system in which women are always disadvantaged. Actually, we are talking about stratification, which is the hierarchical distribution of resources by gender: gender stratification affects all societies, albeit in different forms and to different extents (Chafetz, 1984; Lombardi, 2016c).

3. The dimension of violence against women

The dimensions of violence in the world are considerable: it is estimated that 35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or sexual violence by a non-partner at some point in their lives. However, some national studies show that up to 70% of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime.

According to UN's Women Report, women who have been physically or sexually abused by their partners are more than twice as likely to have an abortion, almost twice as likely to

experience depression, and in some regions, 1.5 times more likely to get HIV, as compared to women who have not experienced partner abuse. It is estimated that of all the women who were murdered worldwide in 2012, almost half were killed by intimate partners or family members, compared to less than six per cent of men killed in the same year. Psychological violence is even more difficult to estimate: in EU Member States, about 43% of women have suffered some form of psychological violence by their intimate partner. There is also some concern regarding sexual cyber-bullying: 10% of women (aged 15 years) are victims and the risk is especially high for the age group 18-29 years (UN Women, 2015).

According to a survey of the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency (EU FRA, 2014) based on 42,000 interviews carried out in the 28 EU countries, 7% of women aged 18-74 (13 million) suffered physical violence in the twelve months before the interview. Among them, 2% were victims of sexual violence (3,7 million), and 5% were victims of a rape since the age of 15. Moreover, 18% of women have experienced stalking since the age of 15, and 5% of them have experienced it in the twelve months preceding the survey, which means about 9 million women.
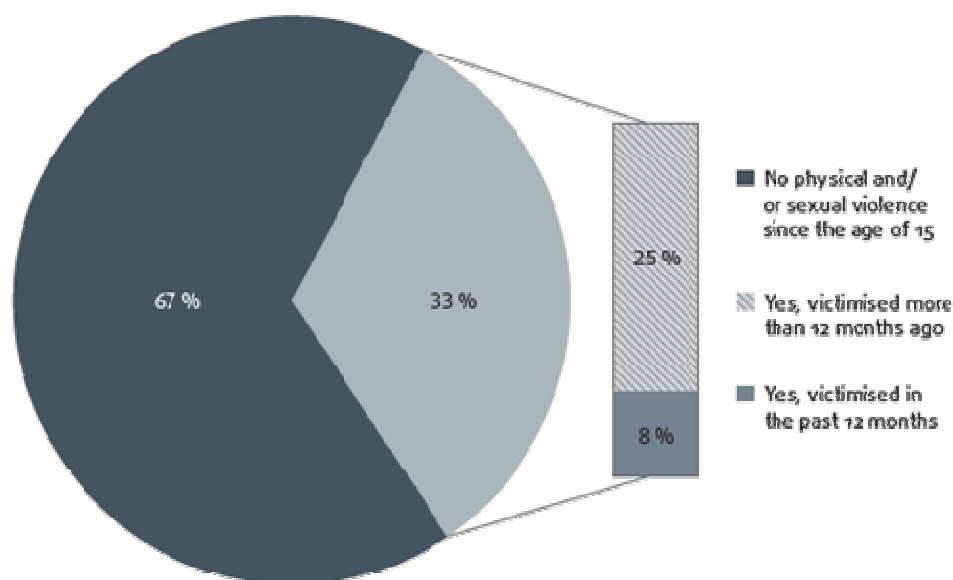

Fig. 1: Women experiencing physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15 and in the 12 months before the interview, EU-28 (%). Based on all respondents (N = 42,002). Source: EU FRA (2014)

Some 12% of women indicate that they have experienced some form of sexual abuse or incident by an adult before the age of 15 (about 21 million women). The results show that 30% of women who have experienced sexual victimisation by a former or current partner also experienced sexual violence in childhood (EU FRA, 2014). Moreover, half of all women in the EU (53%) avoid certain situations or places, at least sometimes, for fear of being physically or sexually assaulted. In comparison, existing surveys on crime victimisation and fear of crime show that far fewer men restrict their movement.

3.1. The Italian context

With regard to the Italian context, in 2015, the National Statistics Institute (ISTAT) published the second report on "Women's Safety" in Italy. The report highlights that 6,788,000 women (31.5%, aged 16-70 years) have suffered some form of physical or sexual violence in their lives: 20.2% were victims of physical violence, 21% were victims of sexual violence, 5.4% suffered severe forms of sexual violence (rape and attempted rape). The numbers related to stalking, too, are very important: 3,466,000 women have been victims in their lifetime (16.1%), 44% of them have suffered violence by former partners, and 56% by others.

The most serious acts of violence are committed by partners or former-partners (62.7% of the rapes) while the perpetrators of sexual harassment are mostly unknown (76.8%). Violence against minors is also high and requires a lot of attention and surveillance: 10.6% suffer sexual abuse before the age of 16. The so-called 'witnessing violence' is connected to the previous data, and there is an increase of 5% of children who are witness to violence committed against their mothers (65.2% in 2014).

Separated or divorced women are more at risk of physical or sexual violence than other women (51.4% vs. 31.5%). The situation of women with health problems or disabilities is equally critical: they are twice at risk of being subjected to rapes or attempted rapes compared to other women (10% versus 4.7%) (ISTAT, 2015).

3.2. Violence against migrant women in Italy

According to the ISTAT's report (2015), foreign women living in Italy run the same risk of being subjected to physical or sexual violence as Italian women (31.3% vs. 31.5%). However, physical violence is more frequent among immigrant women (25.7% compared to 19.6% of Italian women), while sexual violence is more frequent among Italian women than female immigrants (21.5% versus 16.2 %) (Table 1).

The most severe forms, such as rapes and attempted rapes, are prevalent among immigrants (7.7% vs. 5.1%). This means that Italian women are more affected by forms of less serious sexual violence, such as harassment, especially by strangers. Foreign women are more likely to suffer violence (physical or sexual) inflicted by partners or former partners (20.4% vs. 12.9% of Italian women) than by unknown men (18.2% vs. 25.3% of Italian women). Foreign women who suffered violence by a former partner are 27.9%, but for 46.6% of them the relationship had been broken off before arriving in Italy.

Forms of violence	Current Partner[4]		Former partner[5]		Current or Former partner[6]		Non-partner[7]		Total[8]	
	IT	FGS	IT	FGS	IT	FGS	IT	FGS	IT	FGS
Physical or sexual violence	4.9	7.8	17.9	27.9	12.9	20.4	25.3	18.2	31.5	31.3
Physical violence	3.9	6.4	15.4	25.8	11	18.2	12.3	12.6	19.6	25.7
Sexual violence[9]	1.8	3.6	7.8	12.2	5.5	9.1	18.3	9.7	21.5	16.2
Rape or attempted rape	0.4	1.1	3.6	6.4	2.2	4.2	3.3	4.6	5.1	7.7
Rape	0.3	0.9	2.9	6	1.8	3.8	1.1	2	0.09	5.3
Attempted rape	0.2	0.5	1.5	3.2	1	2.1	2.5	2.9	0.13	4.6

Table 1: Women aged 16-70 who suffered physical or sexual violence by men along their life. Distributed by authors, form of violence and nationality (IT=Italians; FGS=Foreigners). Source: ISTAT (2015).

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[4] Out of 100 women with a current partner.

[5] Out of 100 women with a former partner.

[6] Out of 100 women with a current or former partner.

[7] Out of 100 women aged 16-70 years.

[8] *Ibidem*.

[9] Included rape and attempted rape.

4. Field analysis: a quantitative/qualitative study of women abuse in the metropolitan area of Milan

This section focuses on two studies carried out as part of two research projects funded by Lombardia Region[10]. The quantitative analysis, based on the Urban Project (Adami *et al*., 2002) has been followed up by a qualitative study with three focus groups. The latter aimed to further investigate some of the issues emerging from the interviews and the social, cultural and psychological aspects of gender abuse. The quantitative analysis aimed to: (i) investigate the perception of security in the place of residence; (ii) investigate the awareness of gender abuse in its different forms; (iii) quantify the number of victimisation occurrences; (iv) measure the awareness of risk and protective factors.

Three hundred telephone interviews have been carried out with women aged between 20 and 59 and residing in the targeted municipality. The average age of the interviewees is 41.8 years old. Among them, 42% have a secondary school qualification; 74% are married, and 59% live with their partner and children. Fifty-five percent of the interviewees are in paid work, with 35% being in clerical employment. Only 47% of all interviewees consider themselves economically self-sufficient; 33% consider themselves partially self-sufficient, and 20% are economically entirely dependent from their partner or family of origin.

4.1. The quantitative study: some results

About 95% of the interviewees say that they have heard about sexual, physical and psychological abuse: 92% believe that sexual abuse affects all women, and only 3% think it only targets the most attractive women. The media are considered to be the main source of awareness for different forms of sexual abuse, with 95% of the interviewees mentioning the role played in this respect by television, 65% by the press, and 30% by the radio. Among them, 62% declare that drug and alcohol abuse are possible causes leading men to violence; 46% believe that male violence is rooted in the predominance of men over women; 44% think it is a consequence of low levels of education, and 34% believe that having already

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[10] These are two regional projects, entitled: "Piccoli progetti per grandi idee" (2010-2011), and "Progettare la parità in Lombardia" (2012-2013). They have been carried out in partnership with seven public institutions (four councils and three schools) and several actors in the tertiary sector (ten associations and foundations).

been subjected to violence can trigger more. Drug and alcohol abuse and low levels of education are mainly mentioned by younger women (aged between 20 and 39 yo), while for older women (aged between 40 and 49 yo) predominance of the male over the female gender is the main cause of gender abuse. Women aged between 50 and 59 yo are more likely to justify violence by, for example, attributing it to provoking behaviours from women and by considering it to be part and parcel of male nature: 14% of them argue that those women who are victims of sexual abuse must "have done something to trigger it". This different distribution between age groups could be attributed to social and cultural changes in gender relationships and stereotypes. Fifty-nine percent of the interviewees consider violence against women to be serious even when it takes place within the family or circle of friends, despite women aged between 50 and 59 being less likely to firmly condemn it. Importantly, 96% of all interviewees believe that under no circumstance can violence against women be justified.

Among the interviewees, 91% believe that a great proportion of abuse and violence against women takes place within the family and/or in a domestic environment. It is the kind of violence that Ignazia Bartholini calls 'proximity violence', "because it is the 'foundation' and 'proprium' of interpersonal behaviour; violence as a means to identity recognition, violence as a form of relationships of proximity" (Bartholini, 2013: 12). Moreover, 66% of the participants in the study consider that a man slapping his partner is a very serious act, while 29% considers this to be a rather serious act; 69% of the interviewees deem that a man forcing his partner to have sexual intercourse with him constitutes a very serious and non-justifiable act; 27% believe this to be serious because it reveals a lack of respect for the woman. Another important theme explored is the reason why women who are subject to their partner's abuse do not leave. Contrary to what is commonly assumed, almost half of the interviewees (45%) argue that fear is the main reason why women who are victims of abuse do not leave their violent partners; 22% would not leave them because of the children, and 16% for economic reasons. Mention of fear is recurrent in the focus groups carried out with women, as we will see in the next sections.

The decision to stay with their partners despite the violence experienced cannot be labelled as 'passive reaction', inability, or 'inadequacy': it is often dictated by several factors and is accompanied by a strategy of 'resistance' and by actions that aim to change things, such as requests for help addressed to family members, friends or social and healthcare professionals (Romito, 2000; 2005; Creazzo, 2000). Only 9% of the interviewees (27 women)

admit they have been subjected to violence/abuse during their lives. This percentage increases to 15% among women aged 20 to 29. Among those women who admit they have been subjected to violence and abuse in the two years preceding the interviews (15 women) only 25% (4 women) say they have reported the abuse to the police.

As far as risk factors are concerned, the majority of the interviewees (53%) identify a violent man as someone who is by nature prone to aggressiveness or who has psychological problems. Compared to protective factors, 72% of the interviewees mention social and healthcare services and charities as organisations that can offer help to women who have been victims of abuse; 70% mention the police as being able to help. Seventy-two percent of the interviewees mention harsher punishment, and 45% the protection and support for women as the most effective measures to fight the phenomenon. This indicates a normative/punitive approach rather than a constructive/reflective one, which reveals a cultural shift in gender socialisation and relationships.

4.2. The qualitative analysis: focus groups

The issues 'on the table' during the focus groups are those that had emerged in the quantitative study. The following issues have been investigated: a) the causes of insecurity for women; b) the reproduction of violence against women; c) the value system: images of violence and acts that are considered to be the most serious; d) the context in which violence takes place; e) change. Three focus groups have taken place with 14 women in total, living in the three targeted municipalities and chosen on a voluntary basis during the telephone interviews. With the exception of a 27-year old woman, all other participants were aged between 40 and 50; women taking part in the second focus groups were mainly employed in the educational sector (the majority being teachers); women taking part in the third focus group were on the contrary employed in different fields: they worked in research, were self-employed or civil servants; five women taking part in the three focus groups claim to have experienced physical and/or psychological violence.

Focus groups have taken place at different times and in different places, and this has defined the different composition of women participating in each group. Focus group 1 has taken place in the mornings, and therefore only unemployed or retired women have taken

part. In this meeting, economic problems have been often discussed, thus highlighting the burden of being dependant on the partner, who is the main breadwinner. The other two focus groups have taken place in the evenings with all participants being in employment: the sense of independence and the freedom of judgement among these women have been significant.

4.3. The women's insecurity

The participants' observations on the causes for women's insecurity have raised some key issues. First of all, educational and female gender socialisation models have been mentioned:

> *I believe this insecurity stems from, on the one hand, the fact that we are brought up to be mothers, that is caregivers, which is what we, according to the Italian cultural model, should be…* (F1-f)

The cultural model which makes women feel insecure and inadequate is often debated and participants mention another upbringing and gender socialisation model: parity of and between genders:

> *there are several reasons why women feel fragile, because we have never been on a par with those we deal with. At work for example or when you are already a mother you must be a mother and nothing else, instead this is not true and you feel different, not on a par with your partner. Then in all things, you must give more to be on a par. I believe that on the contrary we are able to do much more than men...* (F2-c)

Participants are aware that change must come from different areas, and that social factors – family, school, religion and norms – must contribute to promoting equality, respect and sharing between genders. Not listening, pretending nothing has happened, not noticing the other's uneasiness are seen both as a form of insecurity and as real violence:

> *Then, years of depression, in bed, I used to cry, I could not be bothered: I used to get up in the morning and take my daughter to school, then went back*

> *home, went to bed, slept and cried. I used to get up at four to pick up my*
> *daughter from school. No one had ever noticed anything, neither my friends*
> *nor my husband. When I dared going to the doctor's and ask for some*
> *tranquillizers my husband said I wanted to lead the good life. He insulted me,*
> *Therefore I quietly fell back into line...* (F1-f)

This is accompanied by the silence of others: brothers and sisters, parents, and society in general. When women's anxiety and problems are neglected, or even stigmatised, how can one build awareness, self-confidence and the strength to change one's own life and what surrounds it? Loneliness and isolation are therefore also mentioned as factors that generate and reproduce fragility in women. Many have however also mentioned the role played by the media in generating insecurity (Misiti & Palomba 2002):

> *Going out on your own, being attacked, things that are often a little fuelled by*
> *the media. Insecurity is perceived. It's not that things do not happen, but*
> *perhaps perception plays a role in magnifying reality. There is a side to*
> *insecurity which stems from women being more fragile and another that is, so*
> *to speak, created* (F2-n)

About this, Franca Bimbi (2015) reflects on the representations of femicide in the Italian press, highlighting the emphasis on romantic and passionate loves that would lead to the murderous *raptus*. "In this case" – the author writes –, "the press acts as a social circle that reproduces the defensive stereotypes of reputation, in native cultures of masculinity" (Bimbi, 2015: 38).

Women's lack of confidence is also seen as a psychological factor which may have been triggered by a perhaps excessively protective family environment or by the upbringing received:

> *Lack of confidence is without a doubt a psychological reason which may stem*
> *from family-related factors, or depend on your upbringing: I think of my*
> *mother, who was a little too strict, that is was excessively concerned when I*
> *went out, how I behaved etc. Surely my family environment has had an*
> *impact* (F2-mc)

'Insecurity' is a multidimensional element which impacts on several aspects of women's social and personal life. Several participants in the focus groups declare they have no fear, and thus that they will not pass any on to their children. They are however aware that:

> *the lack of confidence that women carry within is much more subtle… in the home, in the family, at work, we have it inside. Unless we shake it off because we want to do so, society certainly does not help us. It suits men [that women feel fragile]. I can see this in the young mothers I deal with now...* (F2-s, a teacher)

Then there is fear, both perceived and induced, that kind of fear that:

> *generates lack of confidence, creates problems at work, in the relationships with others. This is what I dread all the time. I do not enjoy what I do, I lack confidence. I always feel "I cannot do this"* (F3-f)

An objective and a subjective dimension, the latter linked to the lack of confidence, emerge from both the quantitative analysis discussed earlier and from the focus groups. If, on the one hand, quantitative data show the objective and 'external' perception of people (e.g. the insecurity in the place of residence), on the other, the observations emerging from the qualitative study highlight a subjective dimension: this starts from within and uncovers new worlds and factors which contribute to the social construction of the lack of confidence of the female gender.

4.4. The social reproduction of gender violence

We have asked our participants in the focus groups what they think produces and perpetuates violence against women, and why this happens. Once again, answers and observations have been diverse, but always very articulated and complex.

According to some women, the problem is rooted in the system of values related to maternity and family, in the 'lack of appreciation' for women's reproductive role and their role within the family (Balbo, 1978; Bimbi, 2003). Therefore, *maternage* and family care

become the centre of women's inequality and discrimination (Chafetz, 1984). Women's unequal position and the fact that they are discriminated easily leads to violence against them on the part of those who hold (or believe they are entitled to hold) power and control.

According to other participants, it is women's sense of guilt which often allows men to perpetrate and reproduce power and violence against women:

> *the sense of guilt... in my case plays a big role... such as... if I think I have done something not quite right, if I am then told off, if attention is drawn to it or if I see something I do not thoroughly agree with, I don't point it out, I keep quiet because I believe I made a mistake earlier and thus the sense of guilt prevails. I do not know whether this is a kind of violence I have made up, because I am the one who experiences a certain thing, here I am, instead of saying ok, I made a mistake earlier, but now he is the one making a mistake… Why am I locked inside this vicious circle?* (F1-e)

The participants also mention merely biological reasons for gender violence, which are hotly debated, leading to more complex and shared interpretations. Here are some extracts from this debate:

> *Since the origins of humankind it seems to me that violence has been a non-negligible factor, also from a biological point of view. Hence men are aggressive, and use and show aggressive behaviour. Hence it is normal for testosterone to manifest itself in violent acts... We must face violence every day and we must learn to dominate it, or at least to live with it.* (F3-P)

> *But is it testosterone which differentiates men from women? Why do we always talk about violence against women and rarely about violence against men? Is it just testosterone which determines this kind of violence, of aggressiveness?* (F3-f)

> *Well, it may be a cultural thing, for example men are more interested in power than women. Why? You can exercise violence against men, when you*

are in a powerful position, therefore it is not testosterone but who knows what, maybe blackmail (F3-m)

However they are linked, male violence is linked to testosterone and to violent impulse because from a biochemical point of view they are two very similar phenomena... it is also linked to sexuality... sexuality is linked to the presence of sexual hormones and these hormones facilitate certain collateral behaviours, they are linked to one another. Therefore, male sexuality is a little different from female sexuality because there is a gender component [gender is mistaken for sex here] and therefore there are different dynamics at play here. (F3-p)

Soon after this 'bio-genetic' interpretation of male violence, the same participant highlights aspects of change which are more linked to social and cultural phenomena: without initially realising it, she interprets the tight relationship between biological and socio-cultural phenomena as follows:

So this is the behaviour, but in future I think that there will be a big revolution... Now I think that already in our society several of these mechanisms are no longer valid because in many ways gender [sex] is no longer as determining as it was in the past (...) This cultural change will then have an impact on hormonal mechanisms (F3-p)

Two additional and important issues are raised in order to provide an explanation for violence against women, the first of which is power and its handling by men:

Violence reminds me of war and what is war if not a way to conquer, to gain more power? When violence is exercised against a person this happens because I am more powerful than you, I can do this because I am stronger, I have control over you. I think it is a cultural characteristic more typical of men than of women, the will to affirm one's own power (F3-m)

The second is the lack of means on women's part:

When I am subjected to an act of violence I react, if I do not react it is because I do not have the economic means to do so and I do not have the help/attention [she means from others], because if a woman upsets the order which is deemed by society to be what it should be, then she has the void around her (F1-r)

we do not have the means, we are not trained as men would be and then we have the whole society around us making us feel guilty. Society does not want anything to change (F1-f)

We thus come to the shared observation that behaviours, models and attitudes which refer to one gender rather than the other are mainly social constructions and induced upbringing models:

I have a son who has always played with dolls, he used to identify with certain TV characters… who when he saw his friends used to hide his toys, despite the fact I have never discouraged him, on the contrary I used to play with him so that he would have someone with whom to share. Despite all this, when he was with others he had to show he could play football and be tough. I do not think he is homosexual, I do not know, I have not yet found out. He still plays on his own because I think he cannot share his passion for cuddly toys with his fellow male mates. He is very creative. Hence he has few friends because when he invites them he must give up what he likes and adapt to what as a norm is required of a boy (F2-na)

4.5. The value system: images of violence

Images of violence have always been very clear among the participants. Violence has been defined as destructive since it leaves women on their own, covers them with shame, and makes them feel different from those women who do not experience it:

> *The thing is this, that being a victim of violence is almost your fault… even psychologically you feel inferior because you have been subjected to an act of psychological violence and it is this which makes you feel inferior and stupid for having been subject to it. Therefore it is a sort of chicken and egg problem* (F2-1).

Another recurring image of violence against women is the lack of respect, the little consideration, first of all on an intellectual level. As already highlighted above, the images of violence against women – as a form of power and predominance – are often emphasised by the participants:

> *Violence presupposes a lack of respect for people…Violence can be physical but also more subtle, such as affirming one's own power and predominance on that person* (F3-m)

In inviting the participants to think about the feelings that a woman who has been victim of abuse and or violence can have, the most recurring images that emerge are: terror, hate, fear, resentment, disgust and contempt. The most effective image has been provided by a woman regarding her father:

> *I do not hate him, I have felt nothing, absolutely nothing and I think this is the worst thing. My father died not long ago, if I had lost a pet I would have felt worse. A total void. I have feared that lack of feelings. Hate is a feeling, affection is a feeling, love is a feeling. Feeling nothing is nothing. It is the worst possible thing… No feeling, and you see, having no feelings is difficult. Why this void?* (F3-f)

In recognising and defining the most serious forms of violence against women, participants have found themselves in disagreement, possibly as a consequence of their experiences and representations. As a result, according to some of them, physical violence (such as beating) is the most serious form of violence, while for others it is sexual violence:

I think that you can forget physical violence and that it is not as traumatic as sexual violence, because the latter is not only sexual, through that kind of violence a man destroys you (F3-f)

If Giddens (2000) sees sexual violence as an act of degradation imposed on women, Susan Brownmiller (1975) goes further and interprets this kind of violence as a male system aimed at intimidating, which keeps all women in a state of fear and forces them to think about and adopt 'protective' measures in the various areas of their everyday lives (such as not staying out until late, getting dressed in a certain way, going certain places, etc.)

Other participants see psychological violence as the most serious form of abuse:

On the contrary, I think that psychological violence is much more powerful, because it makes you feel inferior, powerless, therefore you cannot fight it back in any way because you… if you could afford to be a person with the same rights as a man, you could defend yourself, or maybe he would not dare. On the contrary, when you are subjugated, psychologically too, you cannot escape from that prison, this one [the man] takes advantage in all possible ways, he makes you feel shit, excuse my language. (F1-f).

We have collected some interesting observations on this issue, which lead us to consider more complex and multidimensional aspects of violence. For example, one participant highlights that there is a difference between an isolated attack or sporadic abuse and repeated violent acts:

I think we must distinguish between events. One thing is an isolated act of violence, another thing is repeated violence, maybe inside the home, either sexual or of another kind. What life can someone who lives in constant fear have, they are not a free person (F3-m)

The ambivalence of a violent relationship is also taken into consideration:

I believe that if two people beat each other, but they are in a relationship, they do not experience violence in such a serious way, then this is also one of the reasons why women do no report abuse to the police... (F3-p)

4.6. The context in which violence takes place

All participants have shown an awareness that in the majority of cases violence against women takes place inside the home but, much to their amazement, have indicated 'external' places as those that 'instigate fear'. They have skilfully denied this apparent contradiction, blaming the media and some cultural stereotypes for portraying violence as taking place 'outside' and have also contextualised events:

> *I think that women can have fear depending on their personal situation: she who has an unsafe family context I imagine will experience fear at home, if she has a difficult situation in the workplace she will experience anguish even on her way to work.* (F3-m)

4.7. Change: what can be done?

At the end of each focus group we have invited all participants to suggest possible changes and actions that can promote a culture of parity and respect between genders. Suggestions have been many and varied but all pointing to some key issues: starting from women's lack of economic independence, participants suggest forming women's groups aimed at promoting employment and activity exchange: such actions will also help them become economically independent.

All participants highlight the need for adequate services (social, legal, healthcare services and shelters) with professionals adequately trained to welcome women who have been victims of violence. The participants report shortage/lack of such services in the areas where they live:

> *Create, in my opinion, services (women's help-desks, hotlines, etc.) accessible to women who experience difficulty and especially who are alone, so that they are not left on their own, so that information can be exchanged. Because the fact itself of being able to communicate, to talk about their own problems, helps them to no longer feeling alone.* (F3-p)

Information is equally important: women must be informed of what protection is in place and what rights and points of reference are available to them. It is the kind of knowledge that helps people to do things, to change. Education is widely mentioned since it promotes cultural change. Schools are often referred to as a privileged environment in which to kick off change, in which to meet younger generations and their parents. Culture, together with education, is therefore deemed to be of significant relevance:

> *To me this is fundamental: to enable women to choose – to educate them from an early age – to recognise what is right for one or the other. While for my grandmother rules were strict and life pre-ordered, this was less the case for my mum and from this point of view we feel freer, since we have more choice (...) Nowadays women are more aware, they know what is right for them.* (F2-mc)

Another hotly debated issue is 'women solidarity' that is collective moments of mutual self-help and of action in the fight against violence, aimed at building self-awareness and at promoting virtuous behaviours and attitudes:

> *I think that women need to go out more often, turn the TV off, go out and meet other women and do things together: talk about their problems and try to find a strategy for change, even within their family. In other words, develop awareness.* (F1-f)

We think it is important to consider one last suggestion which, although only mentioned by two participants, we believe to be one of the main routes to be pursued in the fight against gender violence. It is about taking men into consideration too – be they rapists, abusers or not – in this path towards change. It is about prevention and cure, as a participant stresses:

> *To cure perhaps not just women but also these men, to make sure they stop. I don't know... ideally putting these people in rehabilitation centres, not in prison. Unfortunately, society does not spend enough on this.* (F3-m)

We also need to find a way to meet with men, although these are men who are not easy to approach. (F2-na)

5. 'Talking to him': reflecting on victims and offenders

These suggestions by the focus group participants prompted a new project[11]. In addition to awareness and training actions for social and educational workers, we also carried out a qualitative survey aimed at ten sex-offenders and abusers who were attending a 'crime re-elaboration' program in prison[12]. The purpose of this survey was to highlight an 'inclusive' methodological approach ('between authors and victims') by overcoming a conflicting approach. This perspective is represented by a slogan posted on the walls of some public buildings and which reads "Violence against women is a men's problem" (Bozzoli *et al*., 2013). Recurring issues in the analysis of sex-offender interviews were: violence decoding; family context; the relationship with women; change; and reference values. The ten interviews with perpetrators of violence (sex-offenders) and of mistreatments against women placed us, as researchers, in a context of observation and analysis which was very different from what we had expected. For example: a) the different territorial (north/south) and geographical origins (Italian/foreign) of the men interviewed did not appear to have a decisive influence on their criminal acts; b) with the only exception of two cases, no stereotypes and discrimination against women emerged.

On the other hand, as showed by current literature on this topic, social conditions of origin, having suffered or experienced family violence, infant abuse, and abandonment represent factors that significantly affect the different forms of violence against women. Another issue raised by almost all respondents is the use of physical strength, money, criminality or semi-criminality to gain power and respect. The participants use this kind of behaviour in their relationships with women, reproducing dynamics of gender inequality and discrimination and building relationships based on the possession and control of women.

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[11] "Between offenders and victims. Breaking down stereotypes, banishing violence", a project funded by the regional programme "Progettare la parità in Lombardia", 2012.

[12] The ten interviews were conducted in cooperation with CIPM (Centro Italiano per la Mediazione) and a team of criminologists, psychologists and social workers working at the "Talk with him" project.

6. Conclusions

To conclude, a comparison between the work done by social workers during the writing workshop[13] and the interviews with sex-offenders shows some intertwined dynamics between victims and sex-offenders, as a social worker points out: "there is no victim without an abuser and vice versa". This is a 'hard' statement, despite its alleged realistic analysis, perhaps expressing a prejudice on the part of social workers (Adami & Basaglia, 2002) who daily face painful and contradictory stories of women who are victims of violence and abuse. There is also evidence that violent dynamics, submission, silence and fear, and women's expectation that the situation will change are accompanied by the expression of strength, control, aggression and terror exercised by men (Grimaldi, 2013). These trends – reinforced by gender inequalities and discrimination – reproduce rather than break the vicious circle.

The writing workshop has been carried out starting with three key words: aggressor, victim, violence. Once again, participants tell us about several violent acts, such as parents' violence against their children, and children witnessing violence between their parents. Participants speak of a violence which is entirely internal to family relationships, something that Bartholini, as mentioned before, calls 'proximity violence' because it is a means of recognizing identity and a form of closeness relationship (Bartholini, 2013).

These stories are characterized by expressions of terror, helplessness, resignation. Once again, however, social workers emphasize the cycle of violence: abused and raped children, living in conflictual and/or degraded environments tend to reproduce the same relational mechanisms (Romito, 2005; Giulini & Xella, 2011). Women, on their part, tend to run into 'strong' and 'dominant' men who, in turn, are likely to seek 'fragile', 'subordinate' and 'condescending'women: the latter accept violent acts with resignation or as part of a 'normal' male-female relationship. A vicious circle made of language, symbols, and specific communication categories produces and reproduces violent roles and dynamics in which, as Bourdieu argues: "[s]ymbolic violence is established through the adherence that the dominated grants to the dominant" (Bourdieu, 1998: 45).

As a matter of fact, vulnerability is considered to be one of the main risk factors. It is defined as the probability of someone being hurt by the dangerous behaviour of someone else (Nardacchione, 2009). According to Nardacchione, if the elimination of all the risks is an

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[13] An action which is part of the same project mentioned in note 11.

abstract concept, in reality it seeks to achieve an acceptable level of risk: for women this means learning how to implement forecasting, prevention, protection and defence, all of which are activities aimed at reducing damage (*ibidem*).

The actions aimed at damage reduction are useful but not conclusive, and do not produce change. The research projects and activities carried out in the local municipalities, which we discussed in this paper, help us comprehend the social construction of gender violence and where and how violent behaviours generate and develop.

The next step is to understand and learn how to break the cycle and to implement relationships between genders and generations based on solidarity, respect, equality and dignity. Therefore, synergistic actions among institutions, social and educational services are needed as well as theoretical and empirical contributions which can 'interfere' with social structures (such as family, school, religion, politics, economy etc.) and 'undermine' the cultural roots of gender violence (Lombardi, 2016c). An example of this commitment is given by the measures which fight violence against women, implemented by the municipalities we targeted in our project. The experience of these municipalities started in 2009 with the widespread aim to fight violence against women by establishing a "Women's Help Desk" and a territorial network of public administrations and services, non profit associations, hospitals, healthcare centres and workers' unions. Municipalities have implemented a model of active governance by providing: a) training courses for social workers, psychologists, solicitors, teachers, policemen; b) information and awareness campaigns for students and for citizens; c) help and support for women victims of violence[14].

The governance action has had a very positive effect in the local area: since 2009, over 400 women have been received and supported in their path of sensitization regarding violent actions and they have been helped to exit from the violent contexts. The "Women's Help Desk" is still active and the services' network has expanded and consolidated. Alongside the daily actions of the services to support women, awareness-raising activities have been intensified towards the population as well as the educational and cultural activities with adolescents and their teachers, about gender discrimination and violence.

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[14] For more information on the processes for construction of networks and policies to fight violence against women, cf. Deriu (2015).

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